But his foolish heart continued to cling to hope.

—“You are my savior and my scar.”

SHINee – Atmos

The rich aroma of coffee still hung thick in the air, but the soft, domestic bubble of the morning had inevitably begun to deflate. Tui had stepped down to the parking lot to clear out the food containers and give them a moment of privacy, leaving the apartment quiet once more.

Hong stood by the front door, fully dressed in his own wide-legged jeans. The borrowed pajama bottoms were neatly folded on the kitchen counter—a small gesture of respect for the space that had held him when he was falling apart.

Lego leaned against the hallway wall, his dark waves still falling loose around his shoulders, free from the half-ponytail. He had changed into a simple, soft sweater, but his bare feet and quiet posture made him look smaller, younger, and entirely real in the bright morning light.

"You're really going to do it?" Lego asked, his voice low, cutting through the low hum of the refrigerator. "No more turning off your phone? No more hiding?"

"I promised you, didn't I?" Hong said, his voice dropping to a warm, steady whisper that was entirely foreign to his usual sarcastic register. Hong let out a soft, dry chuckle. He reached up, his silver rings catching the golden sunlight streaming through the blinds, and idly ruffled his chaotic, chemical-silver hair.

Lego's lower lip trembled just a fraction, a familiar warmth shining in his eyes under the morning sun. He took a half-step forward, his eyes tracing the sharp, unmasked lines of Hong's face. The exhaustion. The fear. The hope that was fighting its way through the cracks in the armor.

"He's going to be angry, P'Hong," Lego said, his voice carrying the weight of understanding. "Nut has been spiraling for a week because he thinks he lost his best friend, and he has no idea what he did wrong."

"I know," Hong whispered. His voice cracked slightly. "He has every right to be furious. He has every right to never speak to me again. And I—I've been preparing myself for that. But I can't keep living like this. I can't keep choosing the dark over the truth."

Hong stepped closer, closing the small distance between them. He reached out, his chipped black nails contrasting gently against Lego's cheek as he stroked it with surprising, lingering tenderness.

"I meant what I said last night, you know," Hong said softly, a tiny, genuine smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "I really would have liked to fall madly in love with you, Shorty. It would have been so much simpler. You see me. You always have. You ask me if I'm happy when everyone else just asks if I'm successful. If it were you, I wouldn't have to bleed just to be understood."

Lego let out a breathy, embarrassed laugh, leaning his face slightly into the warmth of Hong's hand before gently swatting his wrist away with mock indignation.

"Go away, P'Hong." But his eyes were serious—deeply, intensely focused. "I love you," Lego said, his voice soft but incredibly steady against the morning quiet. "You're one of my favorite people in the world. But I can't watch you destroy yourself and everyone around you because you're too afraid to be honest. You have to talk to Nut. You have to face your feelings. You have to get your head straight so we can all breathe again."

Hong's expression softened. "I will," Hong promised, his raspy voice dropping to a genuine whisper. He extended his hand, his pinky finger curved in a small, nostalgic gesture. "Pinky promise. No take-backs."

Lego looked at the extended finger, and a genuine, relieved smile broke across his face. He hooked his own pinky around Hong's, sealing the pact in the bright clarity of the morning sun.

The gesture was simple. The gesture was everything.

"Don't make me regret this." Lego said, but he was smiling.

"I won't." Hong promised.

Hong turned the handle, a sudden, unfamiliar surge of bravery settling deep in his chest. He looked back over his shoulder, a final, lingering smirk returning to his face as his playful energy flickered back to life.

"Tell Tui to stop overthinking things," Hong said. "Before he drives himself insane."

"I'll try," Lego said, though they both knew Tui would overthink things regardless. "But P'Hong—be careful with Nut, okay? Be gentle with him. He's been waiting."

Hong nodded. "I will." Hong said.

He didn't say another word, intentionally stepping out and closing the door behind him, leaving Lego entirely alone in the quiet kitchen.

The heavy door of Lego's apartment building clicked shut behind him, and the sudden, oppressive weight of the mid-morning Bangkok heat hit Hong like a physical wall. His chest felt light. The lingering warmth of Lego's pinky promise seemed to anchor his trembling fingers as he lifted his phone, his silver rings catching the

bright, unforgiving glare of the midday sun.

He didn't open the group chat. He didn't look for a sarcastic meme to shield himself, nor did he check social media for another loud, destructive distraction to drown out his thoughts.

Instead, he unlocked the screen, his chipped black nails hovering over the glass for a fraction of a second before he pulled up a single contact name he hadn't dialed in a whole week of agonizing silence.

Nut.

Hong swallowed the dry lump in his throat, took a deep, grounding breath of the heavy city air, and pressed the call button. He placed the phone to his ear, listening to the first long, agonizing ring, finally stepping out of the shadows and into the light.

The phone screen lit up, cutting through the heavy, suffocating silence of Nut's dark apartment bedroom. He had been sitting on the edge of his unmade bed, staring blankly at the floor, his mind a tangled knot of frustration, confusion, and the lingering weight of his last conversation with Est.

They hadn't seen each other since that cold, shattering afternoon when Est had shown up without preamble, without warning, with an apology that was really an admission of guilt.

Nut could still hear the clinical, distant precision in Est's voice: "I've been coming here for the wrong reasons. I was looking for something. An answer. And I made you part of that search without asking if you wanted to be. I'm sorry." Est had walked away, leaving Nut entirely unanchored—abandoned by his new fixation, and utterly ghosted by his oldest friend.

Then, the phone vibrated in his palm.

Nut's breath caught in his throat.

The name flashing against the glass belonged to the one person who had left him completely stranded in the dark for a solid, agonizing week.

Hong.

Nut let it vibrate once. Then twice. His heart hammered violently against his ribs, a volatile mix of relief and mounting anger twisting in his stomach—the kind of anger that only came from loving someone so much that their absence felt like a betrayal.

On the third ring, his thumb swiped across the screen. His fingers gripped the phone

so tightly his knuckles turned white. He brought it to his ear, his voice raw and heavily laced with the deep, aching hurt of a week-long abandonment.

"Hong?" Nut choked out, the syllable sounding more like an accusation than a question. "Where the hell have you been? Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you understand that I've been sitting in the dark, thinking I'd lost you? Thinking I'd done something so terrible that you couldn't even look at me? Thinking that everything—all of it, our friendship, was just—"

"Don't," Hong's voice cut in.

It wasn't his usual loud, performative, alt-rock snarl. It was quiet. Hoarse. Entirely bare of the persona Nut had come to expect. The sudden, unmasked texture of Hong's voice caught Nut completely off guard, freezing the angry words right in his throat.

"I'm not doing this over a screen anymore, Nut," Hong said, his breathing sounding shallow but deliberate through the speaker. "I can't do this through a phone. I'm—I'm not good enough at words when I can't see your face. And you deserve more than I can give you through a cellular line."

"So you're just going to keep me waiting?" Nut's voice rose, the frustration boiling over. "Hong, I've been waiting for a week. I've been—" His voice cracked. "I've been losing my mind."

"I know," Hong said softly. "I know, and I'm sorry. God, Nut, I'm so sorry. But I need—I need you to meet me. Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Nut scoffed, a bitter, defensive edge creeping back into his tone as he stood up, pacing the small space of his bedroom. His free hand gesticulated wildly, as if the movement could somehow burn away the anxiety coiling in his gut. "You disappear for seven days, leave everyone spiraling in a dead chat, abandon your best friend without explanation, and now you're just expecting me to wait another day so you can dictate when and where we're going to have this conversation?"

"The park by our old school," Hong interrupted softly, though the words carried an underlying weight that stopped Nut instantly. "The playground near the back gates. Where everything started. Tomorrow morning, Nut. Please. I'm begging you."

Nut's voice died in his throat.

He stopped dead in the middle of his room, the phone still pressed against his ear, his breath suddenly shallow.

The mention of their old teenage sanctuary—the exact place where they had spent their hidden, stolen youth before Hong's world had shattered, before his mother had stolen his future—hit him like a physical blow.

First Est had discarded him, and now the ghosts of his past were calling him back to the concrete gates where his entire life had originally broken.

"Hong..." Nut started, his voice suddenly small, suddenly young, suddenly like the fifteen-year-old boy who had fallen in love in the shadows. "Why there? Why—why go back to the place that—"

"Because it's where I need to be honest," Hong whispered, his voice cracking just a fraction. "Because it's where I learned that love could be real, even when everything else was fake. And because you deserve the truth, and you deserve to hear it in a place that matters. A place that meant something to us."

There was a pause.

A long, suffocating pause where Nut could hear the distant sound of Bangkok traffic through Hong's end of the line, could hear Hong breathing, could hear the vulnerability that Hong was laying bare through the simple act of calling.

"Tomorrow," Nut said finally. His voice was not angry anymore. It was just—broken. "What time?"

"In the morning," Hong said. "Before the city wakes up. Before the noise starts. Just us and the ghosts of who we used to be."

The line went dead.

Nut slowly lowered the phone, the screen blacking out to reflect his own stunned, pale expression. The confusion over Est's sudden withdrawal, the phantom memories of the warehouse party, the entire week of agonized confusion—everything suddenly dissolved into insignificance.

He was trapped in his apartment for one more night, left alone with the agonizing anticipation of returning to the beginning of his heartbreak, to the place where the story had started, where a boy had taught him that love was real even when everything else was theater.

Tomorrow, the truth would come. Tomorrow, at the gates of his old school, in the park where they had stolen kisses behind the rusty swings, Hong would finally explain why he had disappeared.

Tomorrow, Nut would either get his life back, or lose it completely.

Tonight, he would not sleep.

The heavy click of the front door echoing through the apartment felt like a physical release, the sudden absence of Hong's chaotic, protective energy leaving the space

entirely exposed to the bright morning sun. Tui walked back into the apartment after going downstairs to leave the breakfast trash in the recycling bin. The work of disposal—the cleaning, the organizing, the small act of making space neat—had given him time to think. Or rather, time not to think.

When he arrived, the entryway was quiet; Hong had already left.

Tui walked into the living room and found Lego sitting on the sofa, his dark waves falling loose across his shoulders as he stared down at his phone. The morning light had caught the gold undertones in his skin, made him look almost luminous.

Lego looked up, setting his phone face down on the cushion beside him. The flush from Hong's parting words still lingered faintly on his cheeks, but his eyes were entirely serious.

"He's meeting Nut tomorrow morning," Lego said, breaking the silence without preamble. The information arrived like a verdict. Like a door opening to a room neither of them was quite ready to enter.

Tui froze in the middle of the room, his hand still raised from setting down his keys on the entryway table.

The support of their entire group—the intricate, fragile network of secrets and unrequited silence they had all been maintaining for years—was about to crumble into the dirt.

If Hong laid everything bare to Nut, the dominoes would fall.

Nut would understand why he'd been abandoned. Est would find out about Hong's history. William's secret about sleeping with Est would become relevant again. But more importantly: the careful balance would shift. The careful distance would collapse. The safe, managed, everyone stays in their designated role structure would shatter.

"He's actually going?" Tui asked, his voice low. His hands were shaking slightly, though he couldn't quite understand why.

"He promised me," Lego said, shifting on the sofa to look squarely at Tui. "A pinky promise. He's going to face his feelings, Tui. He's going to get his head straight. He's being brave."

The word brave landed between them like a gauntlet.

Lego leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his gaze intense. "And you need to stop overthinking things too," Lego said, his voice carrying an edge that Tui had never heard before. "Stop treating me like a fragile little brother who needs you to clean up after him and shield him from the world. That's not love, P'Tui."

Tui's hand dropped to his side, his knuckles tightening as his stoic, unshakeable composure finally cracked. The mask he had worn like iron for months—the protective older brother, the responsible one, the safe harbor in the storm—fell away in that single moment, revealing something raw and terrified underneath.

His jaw tightened as a raw, terrifying vulnerability flooded his face.

"And how am I supposed to do that, Lego?" Tui's voice broke, a rare, harsh friction tearing through his usual grounding tone. He stepped closer to the sofa, his eyes dark with an anxiety he had never allowed the younger boy to see. "You think I want to treat you like a brother? I don't. I—"

He stopped himself, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts.

"I am terrified," he continued, the admission costing him something he couldn't quite name. "I am utterly terrified that if I stop overthinking, if I say what I actually want to say, everything gets weird. And if it gets weird, if I ruin this, I lose you. The group is already fracturing. Est is withdrawn. Hong disappeared. William is carrying secrets. And if I ruin this—" His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "I don't survive losing you."

The confession hung in the air between them. Lego's breath hitched, his posture softening as the sheer weight of Tui's vulnerability hit him—the collision of eight months of careful distance suddenly made explicit, suddenly made real.

The quiet ease of the apartment vanished, replaced by a thick, suffocating intimacy that felt like standing in a room where all the oxygen had been replaced by something heavier, something that required effort to breathe.

Lego stood up from the cushions, his bare feet silent on the cool floor. He crossed the space between them. He reached out to place his hand gently on Tui's tense forearm. The touch was soft.

"You won't lose me," Lego whispered, his gaze fierce, locking his eyes onto Tui's with an intensity that made Tui's entire body still. "Whatever happens at that park tomorrow, whatever happens to the rest of them—Hong and Nut, Est and William, all of it—we face it together. We set a boundary right here, right now. No more hiding behind chores, P'Tui. No more shields."

Tui looked down at Lego's hand on his arm, the warmth of the touch seeping through his skin like proof that he wasn't alone, that the weight didn't have to be carried alone, that the protection could flow in both directions.

His foolish heart ached as he quietly resolved to hold on for just a little longer—but not forever. Not forever. Soon, he would be brave like Hong. Soon, he would ask for what he actually wanted. But not today. Today, he would just—hold this. Hold Lego's hand. Hold the truth that was beginning to break the surface.

"Together," Tui repeated, his voice dropping to a low, gravelly whisper that carried the weight of a solemn vow. "We face it together."

He didn't confess everything right then—the air in the apartment was already too thick, the upcoming storm with Hong and Nut too close, the timing too fragile. But something fundamental had shifted beneath their feet.

The distance that Tui had maintained was finally, irreversibly breaking.

As he looked back at Lego, letting the touch linger just a second longer than a brother ever would, just long enough for a question mark to appear instead of a period, Tui knew the shield was gone for good.

Tomorrow, when their entire world went to the park to break apart, when Hong would finally speak his truth, when the dominoes would begin to fall—he would finally be standing right beside Lego, ready to dare.

Ready to ask.

Ready to be brave.

The morning Bangkok sun rose with a heavy, deliberate slowness, cutting through the humid air like a dull blade. It didn't bring warmth so much as a stifling, inescapable weight, pressing the moisture down onto the city streets until the asphalt seemed to sweat.

The park near the old boarding school was entirely empty at this hour. The usual chaotic symphony of Bangkok traffic was muted here, pushed to the background, replaced instead by the raw, nostalgic smells of wet concrete, rusted playground chains, and fresh-cut grass drying in the heat.

It was a space frozen in time. A graveyard of forgotten afternoons. A place where the ghosts of who they used to be still haunted the corners, still lingered on the rusty swings, still whispered from behind the old concrete walls.

The walls were the same. The asphalt was the same. The playground was the same, just older, just more worn, just like the two boys who had once hidden here and called it love.

Nut walked through the back gates, his sneakers crunching softly against the gravel.

His heart was in his throat, a frantic, suffocating pulse that made it difficult to swallow the dry air. The anxiety was a physical thing—a tightness in his chest, a tremor in his hands, the specific fear that came from knowing that the person you'd been waiting eight years for was finally about to speak, and that the words might destroy everything.

Every single step felt like a regression into his fifteen-year-old self. The self that was brave. The self that loved without calculation. The self that hadn't learned yet that love could be weaponized, that connection could be severed, that the person you loved most could simply—disappear.

This was the dirt he used to run on. These were the concrete walls that had shielded his first secrets. These were the rusty swings that had held him when he was scared.

Walking here now, he wasn't a man who had been ghosted for a week; he was a boy who had been left behind a decade ago.

The ghosts of his youth seemed to crowd the periphery of his vision, whispering accusations of all the things he had failed to become. The boy who'd learned to love. The boy who'd loved anyway. The boy who'd waited.

He rounded the corner by the old rusty swings, his fingers instinctively tightening into fists.

And then, he stopped dead.

The world seemed to lose its sound.

Standing there, leaning against the stained concrete wall—the same wall where they'd carved their initials eight years ago, though time had weathered the marks—was Hong.

There was no stage light to soften him. No carefully applied eyeliner to sharpen his gaze, no performative, alt-rock armor to keep the world at bay.

His chemical-silver hair was messy, tossed around by the humid breeze, the color looking almost defiant in the morning sun. His face was completely bare of makeup—no concealer, no foundation, no mask. The face of the person who had woken up and chosen authenticity over protection.

Without the product, the faint, exhausted shadows beneath his eyes were fully exposed to the harsh daylight. The shadows told the story of a week without sleep, without peace, without the numbness that cigarettes and alcohol and distance had once provided.

Hong wasn't looking at his phone. He wasn't hiding behind a cigarette or a cynical smirk or the protective armor of the Rebel persona that he performed for the world. His bare eyes were locked directly onto Nut, wide and entirely unanchored, held by nothing but the decision to be here, to be honest, to finally let someone see underneath.

The space between them felt miles wide. Heavy with years of performance. Heavy with seven days of agonizing silence. Heavy with a lifetime of unsaid truths—the

looks they'd exchanged across crowded rooms, the way Hong had always reached for Nut first, the careful distance they'd maintained when they came back together, as if proximity was dangerous.

For the first time in three years, the masks were entirely gone.

Leaving nothing but the raw, bleeding edge of who they used to be.

And who they'd been trying to become.

Hong took a breath.

"Hi." he said. The word was small. The word was everything.